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East Timor at the WCC Assembly: the inside story

The World Council of Churches wound up its mammoth seventh assembly in Canberra on 20 February without discussing or taking any position on East Timor.

The WCC's silence on the issue, after its loud and commendable protests on the plight of Australia's Aborigines, has distressed East Timorese who expected East Timor would fare better than at previous WCC assemblies because Australia was the venue and because strong analogies could be made between East Timor and the dominant issue at the Assembly, the Gulf crisis.

The WCC has taken a pragmatic line on East Timor, not unlike that of the Australian government. Like Canberra, it felt bound to condemn the Indonesian invasion in 1975 which occurred as the fifth WCC assembly was taking place in Nairobi. Since then it has placed a higher priority on good relations with the influential Indonesian Council of Churches (PGI) and, though well informed on the magnitude of the injustices in East Timor, has chosen to remain inactive.

This has been the source of acute embarassment to many in the WCC. However each time they have moved to address the East Timor question they have been outmanoeuvred by Indonesia. This latest Assembly shows how it is done.

Prior to the Assembly, a WCC delegation of four was selected to visit East Timor en route to Canberra to assess the situation and report to the Assembly Only one made it. Two were unable because of the Gulf war and a third, a Portuguese Bishop, who was considered the key delegate, was effectively denied a visa by the Indonesian Government. Initially told he would have to apply for a visa in Madrid because Portugal has no diplomatic relations with Indonesia, he was then told on the eve of visit that the visa would have to be collected in Singapore by which time it was too late to make the necessary arrangements.

The one person delegation was put in an impossible situation. Accompanied by Indonesian government and church officials he had no opportunity to see the reality and emerged from East Timor saying he had been misled by foreign press reports on the situation. 'WCC envoy hails East Timor progress' reported the Jakarta Post. A week later none other than the Indonesian appointed Governor of East Timor, Mario Carrascalao, told the Indonesian parliament that repression was provoking further discontent in the turbulent territory!

A large Indonesian delegation, which included an East Timorese Protestant pastor, attended the Assembly. There were in fact more delegates from Indonesia than from the rest of Asia and the Pacific combined. According to observers, officials from the Indonesian embassy in Canberra worked closely with them and employed a familiar intimidatory tactic of photographing Pacific delegates who expressed concern over East Timor. This was supplemented by a more 'christian' tactic which involved some members of the PGI group stepping aside to talk to the Pacific islanders as 'brothers' and advising them that by raising the issue they could create problems for the PGI with the Indonesian Government....

Attempts to have East Timor mentioned in Assembly documents even in passing were abandoned after objections were expressed by the Indonesian delegation. Two examples can be given.

In a draft document, interestingly entitled 'Spirit of truth, set us free', reference was made to 'struggles for self-determination in Kampuchea and East Timor'. Taiwan was substituted for East Timor in the final text.

Another document, the 'Report of the public issues committee'. stated in its draft form 'its support for greater autonomy and independence for those Pacific Island peoples still under colonial domination'. When Pacific island delegates sought to have this amended to include direct references to East Timor and West Papua, the Indonesian delegation objected. This objection was accepted and the final document makes no reference to either situation.

It cannot be denied that the Indonesian Church's role complicates matters for the WCC. It is also true, however, that its political blackmail has succeeded on this occasion and the WCC's self-proclaimed prophetic or 'conscience' role has been badly compromised.

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